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**‘Shut Your Hole, Girlie. Mine’s Making Money, Doll’:
Creative Practice-Research & the Problem of Professionalism**

Roberta Mock

These are words that have come out of my mouth:

Good evening. I’m [...] a raconteur. A storyteller. Dirty stories. Clean stories.

I’m also a *chanteuse*. [Are there any Jews in the house? Yeah?] That’s French for *kurva*.

I own a vibrator. A French poodle. And I went out and bought a roto-rooter. Ah that roto-rooter. I live it up with that roto-rooter. *Mechaya!* A long roto-rooter, I can lend it to two broads standing behind me.

[...] I like that one myself. Clever, isn’t it?

Definition of indecent: if it’s long enough, hard enough and in far enough, it’s in decent. [...]

Definition of a cotton picker: a girl who loses the string of her tampax.

Definition of a happy Roman: Glad-he-ate-her.

Definition of a guy who manufactures maternity clothes. A mother-frocker.

[...] Honey, I got no talent. I got guts, [*baitzim*], big balls. Get used to me, doll.¹

(Williams, 1962)

Almost all of them belonged originally to Pearl Williams (1914-1991) and appear on her live comedy record, *A Trip Around the World is not a Cruise*. This album was recorded in 1961, when Williams was in her late forties, and lasts about 40 minutes in total: just under 20 minutes per side. The first side features one of her ‘midnight’ shows at a club in New York; the second was recorded during her ‘late late’ set, presumably on the same night. Accompanying herself on the piano, and with a liberal sprinkling of Yiddish, Williams jokes about oral sex, vibrators, adultery, promiscuity, prostitution, ethnicity and class. She is working deep ‘blue,’ throwing in a few belted song parodies and some vaguely liturgical

Jewish popular classics. When it was released the following year, Williams' LP (an acronym for a 'long playing' album) had a warning on the cover that read 'For adults only' (see *Figure 1*), meaning that it was not considered suitable for radio airplay and that it was usually kept behind the counter in record stores. You had to ask for it. My grandfather had a copy and it was regularly played at my parents' house parties in the 1960s and 70s. As Giovanna Del Negro has noted, 'party records' like *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise* were often played during 'intimate gatherings in suburban Jewish homes,' creating 'a semi-public context of performance in the heart of the domestic sphere' (2010: 188).

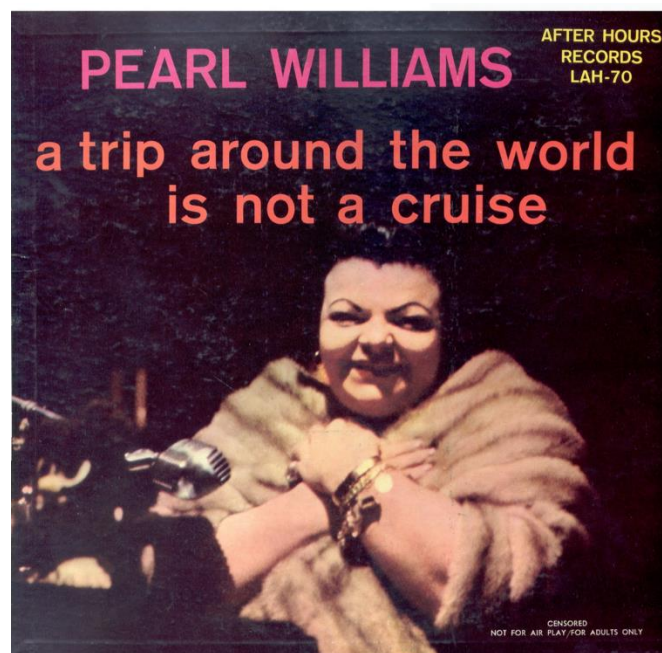


Figure 1: Front cover of Pearl Williams' LP, A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise (1962)

I have performed Williams' words in a number of different contexts, including as a way into academic presentations about performing them to another audience. There is usually a sigh of relief when I explain that they are not actually *my* words, although by this point, they have almost certainly become so. I imagine these academic audiences wondering if it is altogether *appropriate* for a speaker to open a research paper or conference keynote with a string of old school dirty jokes. I suspect that it makes even more of a difference that I'm a woman, perhaps even an older woman. It's somehow not very, well,

professional. On the other hand, most people don't just wander into academic presentations; they are probably aware that I am a performance researcher. And so I then imagine them thinking, 'Oh those performance researchers. Never knowing where the boundaries are. Getting away with *anything* because they are supposed to have presence, charisma, talent... Oh.' Because didn't I also say that I had no talent? Maybe that was a double bluff. 'Maybe what I' – by whom, of course, I now mean a kind of fictional audience member – 'intuited as, well, *unprofessional*, was actually professional *technique*. A professional technique that she' – by whom, of course, I now mean a kind of fictional me – 'just said wasn't even her own.'

And this fictional audience member would, conveniently, be pretty much on the money since this chapter swirls and settles around concepts of professionalism and technique and repetition and embodiment in creative practice-research. At its heart is reflection on my performance in January 2016, on the occasion of my fiftieth birthday, of Pearl Williams' album (rather than, as I may have implied, subsequent presentations *about* this performance). This makes it sound like I performed the entire record. I didn't, but I'll return to that later since, before launching into methodology, or even findings, one is expected to discuss research imperative.

Chickens and eggs: Thinking about research imperatives

Two days before my first performance of *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*, as part of a cabaret that I organised and programmed, I produced a handout for audience members: a one-page document that was posted on the Facebook event page and was also printed and made available throughout the venue on the night. This document tried to emphasise – to anybody who bothered to read it – that I positioned what I was doing as practice-research. In many ways, in announcing in written form that my performance was practice-research, it effectively *became* practice-research (although only for those for whom

that label is meaningful). On my handout, I outlined my three main aims: 1) to locate Pearl Williams' material in my body by finding a Jewish voice; 2) to interrogate her LP as an act of cultural memory; and finally, 3) to interpret Williams' performance from the inside out.

Here is a probably-not-very-professional confession: these aims imply that I always knew why I wanted to make this performance and that I was clear about what I wanted to find out by doing it. I didn't and I wasn't. In fact, this wasn't even the case when I prepared the handout only days before. In retrospect, I *can* say that my aims crystallised in the act of their articulation and do indeed capture what I had been approaching for many years as a researcher – that is, the generation of insight that not only combines methodologically but is also *about* familial, aesthetic and cultural histories and genealogies; that interrogates how one prepares for intersubjective exchanges in moments of performance, characterised always as an event; and that acknowledges how the present always includes absence, what is no longer (or perhaps has never been). But we've been acculturated by dominant (practice-)research agenda^e to think we must be able to express research questions and aims – or at the very least, a problem that needs to be explored – in advance of actually doing a performance (if not in advance of starting to prepare it, or in its very conceptualisation). All I really knew was that I *had* to do this performance. I knew this about nine years before I got around to it, so you'd think I would have been better prepared when the time eventually came.

I am a product of what Rachel Hann (2015) has called the 'first wave' of practice-research in performance. I participated, for instance, in the hugely influential AHRB-funded Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP) project, led by Baz Kershaw from 2001 to 2006, as its South West Regional Coordinator.² Upon reflection, perhaps I need to acknowledge that I'm rather more than a product; perhaps I need to own the fact that my colleagues and I are responsible for many current expectations, however inadvertent or unexpected the consequences. Let me give you an example of these expectations. Every time I speak about *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*, I note that over the course of her

career Pearl Williams sold over a million records, and yet she is barely remembered today. I have always had a not-so-secret agenda, one that wasn't expressed in my aims for the performance even when I was struggling to articulate them, because it doesn't fit with understandings of what comprises a research imperative. In particular, *drawing attention to* somebody or something in and of itself is usually considered a by-product (that is, 'impact') rather than an end product (that is, 'output') of research. And, in order to be valued as impact in, for example, the Research Excellence Framework (REF),³ you need to not only evidence that it makes a difference that people are now aware of this somebody or something but *also* that this has affected change in some demonstrable way, *and* that your performance can be clearly identified as an 'internationally recognised' research output in itself – which seems to be a classic chicken-or-egg situation.

This was something we did not foresee – although perhaps we should have – in the heady days of first wave practice-research. We were fighting to have our work recognised and valued in the academy. Like many lecturers in theatre departments, I was tired of being told that what I did was not serious, was not critical, was not structured and informed, was not ... well, *research*. I was annoyed that my own PhD, started in the early 1990s, couldn't include practice and eventually felt completely separate from the collaborative, feminist, 'total theatre' work I was making in a company called Lusty Juventus Physical Theatre which I co-founded with my colleagues. (I was one of those fortunate people who was appointed to a full-time academic job at the same time I started my PhD – something increasingly rare in the current climate.) For our first four productions, between 1996 and 2001, Lusty Juventus was what we did in our spare time. It did not count in our workload modelling. It was not listed on our research returns to the REF-precursor. We received no kudos for hiring graduates or receiving Arts Council England (ACE) funding. There was no such thing as 'impact' then.

Now I wonder if we (and by 'we', I mean first wave practice-researchers) didn't walk straight into the trap of neoliberalism; indeed, if we might not have unwittingly become poster

children for the neoliberal university in our attempt to make equivalence and so compete with more traditional methodologies and their expression of findings. In our packaging and framing of the originality, significance and rigour of practice-research in certain multimodal ways (and here I'm referencing REF criteria and the infamous 300 word textual descriptors in which we point to having met them), have we not reified a market-driven, corporatised system of value and self-regulation which actually excludes many types of embodied knowledge generation? While this seems contradictory, one path to understanding how scholars like myself were able to reconcile the attraction and promise of practice-research with its grading and monetisation might be found in Michel Foucault's assessment of neoliberalism in the late 1970s.

Foucault believed, although not without reservations, that neoliberalism was able to offer a form of governmentality characterised more by incentivisation and so less through 'internal subjugation of individuals', producing an environment 'in which minority individuals and practices are tolerated' (Foucault in Dean, 2014: 436). Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora (2018) note the relationship between Foucault's thinking on neoliberalism and his advocacy of 'techniques of the self' through which people could 'subjectivate' themselves, thus inaugurating a line of critical radical thinking that coalesced around considerations of 'self-identity,' 'reflexivity' and 'ethico-politics'. Coming of age as a researcher in the 1990s, in a discipline like performance studies that particularly valorises interrogation of and with these concepts (not to mention Foucault's contribution), it is perhaps no coincidence that they are central to my own extended project as a researcher working within a neoliberal environment, both disguising and making palatable some of its central tenets.

Paradoxically, fighting for the inclusion of (often feminist) research, located in and through and as lived experience of the body, has created a moebius strip of solutions and problems. As Sarah Burton observes in a chapter on writing for REF in Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad's *Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University*, this 'stems from the way that the value system of the neoliberal academy and the audit cultures it allows to thrive is

driven by a patriarchal conception of legitimate knowledge production'; as a result, 'many of us simply end up working harder' in order to demonstrate that legitimacy (Burton, 2018: 132). Indeed, my experiences align with the overarching themes arising from Taylor and Lahad's collection – that is, the negotiation of privilege, risk, entitlement and even failure. This, for me, has much to do with competing types of professionalism, since what is professionalism if not self-regulation? Moreover, the environments that sustain and reward 'successful' professional academic researchers are not the same as those that sustain successful professional practitioners. The binding of performance practice to research therefore becomes, for many, a double bind.

Archives, repertoires and gynelineage

My performance of Williams' *A Trip Around the World Is Not a Cruise* was the first time I was able to bring together the two strands of my research: the making of performance with what I had been establishing and analysing for about a quarter of a century – that is, a female Jewish performance tradition which focused, in the twentieth century, on comedy and popular entertainment. Over this period of time, I became increasingly aware that my commitment to this performance tradition was associated with a growing respect for a professionalism which was (and continues to be) too often overlooked. This began, consciously, when I saw the comedian Joan Rivers live for the first time in 2002, mainly out of a sense of dutiful curiosity. What I encountered that night was a consummately *professional* performer, a woman who really knew the business of stand-up. In fact, I'll go further now – in the moment of performance, Rivers *was* stand-up, embodying its history and its cross-generational transmission. I began to understand *professionalism* – in this context – as the interarticulated manifestation of experience and performance mastery.

Simultaneously, I became aware of my own role as an 'expert spectator', the scholarly flip side of the professionalism of the performers whom I study. 'Expert spectator' is

a term coined by Susan Melrose (2007) to describe those who are trained, or have trained themselves, not only to 'see what they can see' but also to imagine the rest in a way that has been 'carefully planned for and largely anticipated by the performance-makers'. When I finally performed stand-up myself via *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*, it was as somebody who learned it, not through doing (which is the standard route for professional performers), but through years of expert spectating.

I had referenced Williams' record repeatedly – and, frankly, quite superficially – when writing about Jewish women and performance over the previous twenty or so years. Mainly this was to position her historically in a self-conscious tradition of bawdy musical comedy by American women that starts with Sophie Tucker (1886-1966). To offer some sense of how this pivot works, in her homage to 'Soph' Tucker in the 1970s and 80s, Bette Midler used to use one of Pearl Williams' response to hecklers: 'Shut your hole, honey. Mine's making money' – which, I think you'll agree, is the ultimate neoliberal put down (Williams herself tended to use 'girlie' and 'doll' rather than 'honey').⁴ Tucker started in vaudeville, working originally in blackface during the first decade of the twentieth century, which was often the only mainstream performance option for 'plain', often Jewish, performers. As Maria de Simone has noted, this experience encouraged her to deploy 'racial, ethnic and character impersonation' as a 'business practice' predicated on vaudeville's dependence on novelty and audience demand (2019: 165). Tucker became a household name with a reputation as a raunchy comic entertainer through the use of *double entendre* and the explicitness with which she referred to sexual desire. As part of the package, she sang the blues as well as schmaltzy Yiddish ballads. Performers like Pearl Williams frequently acknowledged their debt to Tucker as well as a sense of lineage in generational terms. On the back cover of *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*, for instance, is an anecdote about Tucker popping up backstage like some kind of fairy godmother to tell Williams: 'You're me at your age, only better.'

Williams' closest professional associates were Patsy Abbott (1921-2001), who started her career as a vocalist, and Belle Barth (1911-1971), who billed herself the 'Hildegard of the Underworld' and the 'doyenne of the dirty line'. As Michael Bronski writes in a ground-breaking newspaper article about these three women: 'They were tough working-class cookies who used street language. Women were "broad," men were "guys," penises were schlongs or schmucks, vaginas were "knishes," and they have no problem using words like "bitch," "faggot," or "asshole"' (Bronski, 2003). Williams, Abbott and Barth were all raised in New York, performed on the same circuit at the height of their careers, and recorded for the same independent labels; Barth's album, *I Don't Mean to be Vulgar, but It's Profitable*, and Abbott's *Have I Had You Before?* were both recorded live in the same year as Williams' *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*. By the late 1960s, all three were located primarily in Florida where both Abbott and Barth ran their own clubs. After commanding a significant salary of up to \$7500 a week and headlining in Las Vegas, Williams spent the years leading up to her retirement, at age 70, performing at the Place Pigalle in Miami Beach 'to houses packed with busloads of Jewish retirees from nearby condos' (Del Negro, 2010: 193-194).

Besides their use of song and Yiddish – the *mamaloschen*, or mother tongue, of smutty American urban humour – one of the things these comedians had in common was the way they foregrounded their own sexuality as aging women. Again, this starts with Tucker who milked her 'Red Hot Mama' persona until her death in 1966 at the age of 79. In her song 'I'm Living Alone and I Like It,' for instance, recorded in the 1950s, she suggests that she was happy to pay for some gigolo action: 'If I wanna have some fun, if I get bothered and hot, I phone one of those young tall dark handsomes that I've got. So it costs me a twenty or a fifty, so what?' I suspect that *this* (negotiating my own sexuality while aging) is what really compelled me to return to this gynelineage as a performer. And I chose to explore Williams' album, in particular, because I remembered seeing it in the teak cabinet under the record player in our living room when I was growing up. In certain company, my

mother used to perform some of Williams' jokes herself. For adults only. The voice of adult: a blur of my mother's and Pearl Williams'. The voice of having grown up.

Here is a second confession that will undermine my professionalism as a researcher: I had only consciously (that is, as an adult, within the previous forty years) listened to about two minutes of *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise* before I started working on my own performance of it. To be clear, not only had I written about this album, which was sitting on my shelf as a kind of family heirloom, but this was a very long time after I announced that I would be performing it. I didn't have the record digitised until a month before I was scheduled to perform, which is when I started the process of transcribing. The short excerpt I *had* heard – some of which appears at the top of this chapter – represented the majority of what was then available of Williams' work online.⁵ And when it came time to start working with her text in detail, it occurred to me that I was probably committing to a tremendous error of judgement.

It suddenly seemed like career suicide to attempt to make a performance six months into my new role as a research institute director (an institute that didn't exist yet, this was to be part of its launch), given that I had never performed stand-up before, that the audience certainly wouldn't understand most of the (at least) 55 year old jokes (especially with some of the punchlines in Yiddish), that I had only just heard the material for the first time and that some of it was 'problematic' to say the least. Here's an example (that I chose not to perform myself): 'D'ya hear about the fag, was brushing his teeth one morning and his gums start to bleed? He says, "Thank god, safe for another thirty days"' (Williams, 1962). In general, Williams' material is both accepting of and sympathetic to queer experience; although she married and divorced twice, she lived with a woman for years in what was widely rumoured to be a lesbian relationship (Bronski, 2003). While Williams acknowledged and gave voice to a wide range of sexual practices, this was expressed within the mores of the time and to largely straight audiences. As Del Negro has discussed, Williams tended to play to suburban, second generation immigrant, Jewish couples on their annual vacation 'who

longed to escape the unquestioned blandness of their white collar existence and the climate of cultural conformity,' in liminal, drunken, late night venues that prepared them up to a point for her transgressions of gender and sexuality (2010: 204).

I did not feel I had the time to develop the confidence to knowingly quote and make sense of another space and culture, while remaining in the present as a performer. The fact that I am also not very good at memorising lines also contributed to my anxiety. So I decided that I only had to do five minutes of Williams' material – that, after all, is about the length of a standard open mic slot or first set on television. And here we can see the negotiation of professional tensions in action, a negotiation that acts as a smokescreen for real world compromise. Because even though I wasn't entirely sure *why* I was doing this performance in research terms, nor what precisely I would hear when I listened to the album in full, my methodological conceit up to that moment was that I would perform Williams' text in full. Failure had always been inevitable and in a split-second decision – one that I was choosing to understand as self-care – the nature of that failure changed significantly in that it became possible to succeed on different terms.

In the end, I performed a fifteen minute set, comprising about twelve minutes from *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*, with the rest of the material sourced from a webpage that embedded a selection of very short audio files from Williams' other albums. The latter included her *Hava Nagila* medley, which I sang as a grand finale with the klezmer fusion band, Hazaar! The band was on stage for my entire performance and also played two extended dance sets that evening. One of its members is my ex-husband, Dave. You can see him in *Figure 2*, on the left (that is, stage right), playing the clarinet. In her sets, Williams' piano playing underlined punchlines. It was fundamental to her rhythmic structure and was part of her voice. (Williams entered the world of showbusiness in 1938 when, on her lunch break as a legal secretary, she agreed to accompany a friend at a singing audition; apparently, she was hired on the spot and went on stage as a professional pianist that night.) My piano playing was not up to the task, so I asked Dave to be my accompanist. We

rehearsed once together and otherwise worked separately from Williams' LP and a script I sent him of the material I had chosen to perform. This was probably both brave and stupid (or, more generously, just what we could pragmatically manage living in different cities), given that timing and rhythm is almost everything when performing comedy (especially comedy featuring words that the audience is unlikely to understand). And we are *really* not what one could call a cohesive entity; in fact, we had never performed together before, ever, even when we used to be married.



Figure 2: Roberta Mock with Hazaar!, *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise* (Plymouth, 16 January 2016). Photo: Benjamin Graham.

In her book about the performance of cultural memory in the Americas, Diana Taylor identifies two modes of memory. The 'archive' represents 'supposedly enduring materials' such as texts, documents, bones, videos (Taylor, 2003: 19) – or records like Pearl Williams' *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*. The other mode of memory discussed by Taylor is the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practices and 'non-reproducible' knowledges such as dance, spoken word, ritual, gesture and so on. Once it starts flowing through real

bodies, the repertoire is both changeable and unpredictable. We see this in Bette Midler's use of Williams' jokes as an alter ego inspired by Sophie Tucker. It is evident in the collaborative outcome arising from my need to perform some of those jokes with a musician – and not just *any* musician since together we relied upon and produced a very complex and intense network of personal memory associations. Whereas the archive tends to represent an accumulation of official viewpoints, the repertoire – through its 'constant state of againness' (Taylor, 2003: 21) – might be considered the domain of cultural process where new meanings are made. This is one of the reasons why I was adamant that my performance was not an 'impersonation' of Pearl Williams, which I associate with schmaltzy nostalgia acts that are live but not living. Rather, it was intended as an example of how the archive and the repertoire always exceed the limitations of the other and 'exist in a constant state of interaction' (Taylor, 2003: 21).

That there wasn't 'one' archive or 'one' repertoire at work in my performance-making does, of course, cast some doubt on the appropriateness of generically referring to 'the' archive or repertoire. The starting point was Williams' record, of course, situated in a complex lineage of live performances and recordings. The closer you listen to it, the more you realize how edited it is, how much has been left out. There are also its flickering manifestations online which I had used to write about it in the past – transcriptions and descriptions of Williams' performance which deceive you through the power of linguistic signposting into believing in their accuracy. Then there are multiple pathways of repertoire that enact embodied memory – that is, the individual agency that 'requires presence', the participation in 'the production and reproduction of knowledge by "being there"' (Taylor, 2003: 20). These various strands of archive and repertoire are intricately braided in any specific moment of performance.



Figure 3: Roberta Mock, *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise* (Plymouth, 16 January 2016).
Photo: Benjamin Graham.

For the first part of my set, I was wearing my grandmother's fur coat, a fur like Williams wears on the front cover of *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*. Its removal (see Figure 3) was an homage to two moments expressing professional pride in accomplishment by women in their mid-seventies. The first was Aretha Franklin's dropping of her full-length fur to the floor during her Kennedy Center Honors performance a month earlier, in a tribute to Carole King's *Tapestry*. The second was an almost identical gesture by Sophie Tucker during the 1962 *Royal Variety Performance*. Removing her fur stole to reveal a glittery well-fitted evening dress, the autobiographical 'saga' that Tucker half sung/half recited to the Queen and Prince Philip (and British television audiences watching at home) begins with her flinging 'fishes and knishes' in her mother's café while singing to any 'mamzer' she thought would proffer a tip, before ending up in New York, where 'to my surprise / I found there were guys / who idolize / gals oversize.'

There were also traces in my performance of my mother performing parts of Williams' album in the early 1970s, teaching me through example how to be a 'funny Jewish broad' (before I was sent to bed when things got raucous). And there were traces of my godmother

in Jerusalem who explained to me that one of the song scraps I was performing from Williams' recorded set, which I couldn't understand, was from a Yiddish comedy album by the Barton Brothers (1947).⁶ She sang it to me over Skype: 'Joe and Paul *ah fargeniggen*.' The joke was about how Jewish words sound dirty even when they're perfectly clean; *fargeniggen* means pleasure, joy, happiness. On top of all this, the last act of the evening – since I positioned my own set in the prime spot, second from the top of a cabaret bill – was my former student, Sally, who performs under the monicker, The Fantastic Miss Fanny. Her routine, which she devised independently, included some of the Sophie Tucker jokes that Bette Midler borrowed from Pearl Williams. Sally's own burlesque students were working the floor during the cabaret party as well.

Finding Voice

While, in numerous ways, the entire evening was a manifestation of archive and repertoire in interaction, coming at it from a different direction, my specific part in it was a crystallization of almost all of my practice-research going back nearly fifteen years. In many different genres, the conundrum to which I have continually returned is how to 'act' (like or as) my 'self' in non-mimetic ways. This issue consciously emerged through the final Lusty Juventus production, *M(other)*, in 2002. When we embarked on it, the primary research enquiry circulated around the creation of non-essentialised representations of motherhood that resisted stereotypes of the maternal, as well as feminist methods of collaborative theatre-making.⁷ What I ended up discovering, however, was more about how, in the transition from director to performer, I found the need to create a staged persona that acted as metaphor but did not simulate.⁸ Nearly a decade later, in 2011, I performed some of my inaugural professorial lecture as an alter-ego, Bobby the Tel Twelve Mall Elf.⁹ At the time of making it, I thought this piece was about the performance of material and metaphorical boundaries – and, in particular, about how the city of Detroit is constituted through and as performance. It was only some time later that I realized the extent to which it was about my

negotiating the 'performing I' and 'represented I' through the tropes of autobiography and cultural memory while simultaneously working to destabilise them.

As in these previous performances, the word-based spoken text of *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise* became the means through which I augmented my performative self spatially and temporally. This attempt to balance the demands of representing/acting and presenting/not-acting gave rise to complex processes of embodiment. In *The Jew's Body*, the Jewish cultural historian, Sander Gilman, identifies the voice as one of the key markers of Jewishness. This Jewishness – for which, read 'otherness' and 'difference' – is compounded when the voice speaks in Yiddish, the 'hidden' language of the Jews, one that exposes the impossibility of successful assimilation (Gilman, 1991: 34). My own grandparents, who emigrated to Canada as young people, both spoke Yiddish as their first language, but I never learned it myself. While Pearl Williams' use of it in her act did not seem foreign to me, it equally was not comprehensible as anything more than emotive sound.

Perhaps because I could only access Williams via her voice, my performance preparation focused almost entirely on my own voice. For the final month, I spent an hour or so a day stretching and then an hour or more doing vocal exercises. I then spent a few hours transcribing Williams' record, often having to listen to the same passage over and over again, and then speaking it back, again over and over again. Eventually I shaped the text and essentially rehearsed by reading it over Williams' voice. She speaks faster than me, uses her mouth and throat differently, and can sing (that is, in a way that others might find enjoyable). There was a period in which I contemplated moving between speaking Williams' words myself and lip-synching to the record. But, besides being technically very difficult to accomplish – since I would have needed to know and own the words I was ventriloquising just as well and there was also the matter of moving between live and recorded music – this would have created distance between myself and Williams, my body and the voice, between me and my Jewishness.

Still, ventriloquism and its theorisation start to point to how performance analysis might operate from the inside out – which, after all, was one of the stated aims of the project. As Steven Connor writes in his cultural history of ventriloquism, *Dumbstruck*, the voice is both a bodily process and a bodily production or residue. Although it issues from within, it crosses the border from bodily interior to exterior, out into the surrounding space, and only becomes sound through the presence of another body. In so doing, ‘My voice defines me because it draws me into coincidence with myself, accomplishes me in a way which goes beyond mere belonging, association, or instrumental use’ (Connor, 2000: 7).

One day, while I was working on my performance – that is, doing vocal exercises accompanied by YouTube videos – a Facebook message from my mother popped up on screen. She had a rehearsal tip for me.

Me: What’s your suggestion?

My mother: You’re a swan. Most of these women (Totie, Pearl, Sophie)¹⁰ were round chickens. When you’re practising, cut the distance between your shoulders and the floor so that you feel shorter and rounder. And, while I can’t explain it, you’ll start feeling more Jewish, and funnier. I’m reaching back here. When I entertained a lot (informally of course) and when I too was a swan who stood and walked tall, it worked for me. Maybe it will help you. Hugs.

She was right, as mothers so often are. My mother drew attention (both then, in practice, and now, upon reflection) to the importance of technique, what Ben Spatz describes as ‘the knowledge content of specific practices’: ‘Technique consists of discoveries about specific material possibilities that can be repeated with some degree of reliability, so that what works in one context may also work in another’ (Spatz, 2015: 42). The process of making *A Trip Around the Work is Not a Cruise* was effectively one of training my body over a period of 12 months (far beyond the time I spent working on the actual spoken and sung material) to produce a certain type of voice.

As Diana Taylor has noted, the body that does cultural memory ‘is specific, pivotal, and subject to change.... The bodies participating in the transmission of knowledge and memory are themselves a product of certain taxonomic, disciplinary and mnemonic systems’

(2003: 86). I *did* feel ‘more Jewish’ and better able to embrace Williams’ material, not only when I imagined myself short and fat, but also when I concentrated on techniques practised during one of the training workshops I attended, in preparation to do so. This was led by Walli Höfinger and Christiane Hommelsheim, who are both Roy Hart voice teachers,¹¹ at the 2015 Giving Voice Festival at Falmouth University. What I wanted to learn from them was how to be positive and powerful in my voice – despite having a limited range (and ability to carry a tune) – to locate a voice with ‘depth’, one that was lower but still ‘my own’. To this day, I refer to a little drawing I made on my phone during the workshop: a ‘take away’ reminder to sing and speak in alignment with my vagina as a means of remaining corporeally grounded. Konstantinos Thomaidis has noted that there are two strands of vocal training, each of which extend time and space beyond the moment of voicing. One attends to internality and the ‘emergence of voicing in specific anatomical structures’ such as pelvic muscles; this can be described as a ‘listening-in’. However, the practice of a ‘listening-out’ that precedes sounding – which would include my repeated listening to Williams’ recording and the voices of women such as my godmother – renders ‘the emergence of vocal presence unequivocally intersubjective from the outset’ (Thomaidis, 2019: 160).

Location, location, location

When I first decided to perform *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*, it was not conceived as cabaret or a nightclub act. The original idea was that I would visit people’s homes, upon invitation, and then eat a meal with their guests. During the course of this meal (which would include what my father used to call ‘Jewish soul food,’ like *gefilte* fish and *kishka*, that nobody would actually eat), I would eventually perform all of Williams’ album. I imagined myself as some embarrassing old aunt who makes a spectacle of herself, having drunk rather enthusiastically from the Manischewitz bottle. Eventually, after ten or so dinner parties across the country, I thought I would perform a (or rather, Williams’) nightclub set, much as I eventually did in the venue I always envisioned: the Duke of Cornwall hotel

ballroom in Plymouth. (By the time this took place, it had been renovated and looked much more tasteful and corporate but still felt, to me, like the ballroom of a freshly painted Borscht-belt hotel or cruise ship.) This version of the project didn't happen for a myriad of reasons, but especially the impossibility of touring for an extended period of time while meeting responsibilities at my university. In fact, those responsibilities, as a Senior Manager, have become the defining condition of all elements of my research. It shapes both the trajectory of my performance practice-research and also the nature of specific projects.

Here we return to the incompatibility of professional expectations within the academy for practice-researchers, this time due to the extraordinary variety of modes in which we operate within higher education. I have shifted from company to solo work, from touring productions to film or one-off performances, not because it suits either the nature of my practice or my research enquiries but because it is all that is possible, unless you bring in sufficient external money to buy you time. And this is virtually impossible for those whose practice cannot easily be commodified or articulated as commodifiable either within the cultural sector or our highly competitive research economy. To be a professional academic forecloses on my having a professional creative practice in the field I research; and, being unable to develop that creative practice professionally means I will always struggle to meet measurable criteria of research quality. But I digress (sort of).

There are some interesting clues in my original plans to perform *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*. The first is that I associated it with the domestic, returning the spoken material to home environments where Williams' record was most often experienced. The second was that I imagined both myself, and Williams' words, as embarrassing and intrusive and inappropriate (as inappropriate at a twenty-first-century dinner party as at an academic conference). I was particularly interested then in how non-Jews, far removed temporally and geographically from the culture that produced Williams' act, would react to it. Part of me expected *some* laughter, if only because of the recognition of rhythms and patterns of joke-

telling that are now firmly embedded in the mainstream comedy industry. Part of me expected none. Silence. Or nervous, half-hearted but well meaning, twitchy snickers.

But two things happened when the performance finally came to pass. The first is simply that rather than performing ‘the Jew,’ out of place, in a non-Jewish environment, I intuitively felt compelled to create a party space in which the default position was Jewish – gloriously, over the top, outrageously and unapologetically – despite the fact that only about eight people in the entire room of about 170 were actually Jewish (and most of those eight people performed on stage that night). The latter included Marisa Carnesky, who performed a magic routine, and Lazlo Pearlman, who was the evening’s compere and also acted as my ‘outside eye’ during final rehearsals.

The second thing that occurred, almost certainly connected to set and setting, was that I *killed*. Really. The audience ate it up. They laughed hard and a lot. It was an extraordinary experience from the stage, hitting me like a wave of energy. They *got it*, even when they didn’t specifically understand all of the parts that made it. The roar when it was all over was not just relief that I hadn’t died on stage. I can’t prove this, of course. There is no video. That is deliberate. The performance was an exchange, which in itself is not something that can be captured on video; the combination of sound and vision seduces too many people into believing that they may read the encounter in similar ways to a live audience. I had originally planned to make an audio recording and to press a vinyl LP of it, returning my performance back to ‘the archive,’ but that didn’t happen. I’m okay with that, as I have to be, because I need to acknowledge that in not attending to the making of a high quality recording – in leaving it to ‘chance’ – and here I must stress that there was *nothing* else about that evening left to chance, not the candy corn that was sold, not the tea light holders on the table – I was effectively deciding that I would not be submitting this performance to the next REF.

More specifically, in a manner that seems almost passive-aggressive, I ensured that it would not be available as an assessable primary research output – that is, in the mediated

mode we describe as 'performance documentation'. And that is because, I knew – or else, I think I knew – even before doing the performance, that the research output itself was my body and that my research findings were manifest in and inseparable from its extended spatio-temporality. When I suggest that this is impossible to access via a 'document,' it is not because I am romanticising what Spatz has called 'the *trope of excess*' but precisely because, as he observes, '*what we know becomes who we are*' (2015: 56; emphasis in original). What characterises embodied technique is a 'nonspatial, multiplicitous linearity' that represents 'epistemic depth and breadth,' and knowledge can only be recognised through the aggregation of its elements 'as well as countless relationships among them and contexts in which they might be applied' (Spatz, 2015: 45, 46, 48).

Of course, there were audience questionnaires designed to determine what networks and potentials might have been recognised, hard copies of which were on tables in the venue; electronic versions were posted on the Facebook event page the day before the performance and I sent a reminder out the following day as well. I never really expected that many would be returned. Despite some very thoughtful and thought-provoking responses on the twelve questionnaires that I got back, what really struck me was the number of people who told me less formally (frankly, they *blurted* it out) that, because of this performance, they looked at me in a new way. Many assumed that deep down I had been harbouring a desire to tell filthy jokes – in short, that I was co-extensive with the material I was speaking – despite the fact that many had known me for twenty years and had never heard me speak or behave in this way before. It is one of the ideas in my previous writing about comedy – and women's comedy in particular – that was made evident for me on that night. That is, audiences laugh when they believe that *that* body, with *that* history, is capable of saying *those* words in *that* way.

I have often wondered why this is the case and now think that, again, ventriloquism might offer a way forward. As Connor notes, 'Voices are produced by bodies but can also themselves produce bodies' (2000: 35). He refers to these bodies as 'vocalic' and they are

created, shaped and sustained through the oscillating operations between the speaking object and speaking subject. While technique underpins what might have been heard, or translated, the performances produced by such bodies are, for me, as significant for their expression of what can *not* be heard. I had always thought of performance research outcomes as embodying what cannot be expressed in the writing about them, but I am now starting to wonder about the ways and whys that performance research might express what is not there: in my case, for instance, the choices *not* to tell Williams' jokes that I felt were (intentionally or not) racist or homophobic or that asked us to laugh about rape in uncomfortable ways. Or how I cut jokes that I thought were too far removed from contemporary experience and re-ordered others so they built like a current stand-up set.

The day after my performance of *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*, I got a call from my friend Mark. Among other things, he's kind of a promoter and he phoned to tell me he had some gigs for me. I honestly didn't know what he was talking about. 'Doing what?' And he said, 'Stand-up.' And I said, 'But I'm not a comedian.' And he said, 'Yes, you are. I saw you doing comedy last night.' And I said, 'But that was all I have. Those were my fifteen minutes. And they weren't my jokes. And I wouldn't know what to do if somebody heckled.' And he said, 'So you make up another fifteen minutes. There's money involved.' But it was impossible. When is a comedian not a comedian? When she's a practice-researcher.

Doing it like a pro

In the opening episode of the television series, *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* (2017), set in the late 1950s, the title character's 'natural' ability as a comic (sharpened by her close observation and note-taking during gigs) is contrasted with her soon-to-be ex-husband who gets on stage and performs routines that he has copied from a Bob Newhart LP.¹² Like his wife, we the audience dismiss him because he is not original. This means he is not a 'real' comic. He is an amateur – which parallels the way originality is the central criteria for 'real' researchers (just think about how we understand professional postdoctoral scholarship in

contrast, for instance, with what is expected of undergraduate students). To be a professional stand-up – here conflated with ‘paid’ – in this historical moment, means writing or co-writing your own words. There is no way, ethically, that I could continue to perform Pearl Williams’ act as my own. And yet, I have also found no way – so far – of taking it further as practice-research. I’m not convinced repeating my fifteen minutes with different audiences would reveal any significantly different or deeper insights. And the other alternative – to do the material that I cut – would be at odds with my knowledge and intuition as an expert spectator. This is something I discovered as a result of the professional interference that prevented me from performing the whole album in the first place.

While it may seem blindingly obvious to me now, practice-research in comedy has to operate like any comic practice – in other words, it does actually need to make people laugh. Or try to. You can’t generate significant insight into making people laugh, or what it feels like to make people laugh, unless you make people laugh. Otherwise, you produce insights into how *not* to make people laugh. Of course, it is possible to learn an enormous amount from disastrous processes and spectacular aesthetic failure. In one of the most memorable journal articles I have encountered, Martin Welton provocatively argued that practice-as-research is producing a plethora of appropriately theorized practice that is either ‘bad’ or ‘boring’ (2003: 349). Like Welton, I’m saying that the professional standards and intentions of creative practice and creative practice-research are not always compatible. And I’m going to stretch my neck out and say that perhaps, sometimes, they need to be.

Having said that, sometimes, creative practice and creative practice-research can speak to each other in profoundly revealing ways. One of Williams’ jokes always made me laugh when I said it out loud, both in rehearsals (which, I should probably remind you, were almost always only attended by myself) and on stage in front of others. This was not laughing as professional strategy, or what Tony Allen calls ‘timing the corpse’ – that is, a technique used to engage the audience in the ‘now’ by ‘shifting from one seemingly authentic emotional state to another’ (Allen 2002: 29-30). I can do that too, but here I mean

simply that I ‘really’ laughed because I was and remain able to recognise my body, its history and its present working conditions in the neoliberal academy, in these words: ‘Oh boy, am I a nut! If I were normal could I work like this? Never in a million years. My mother doesn’t know what I do for a living. She thinks I’m a whore in Chicago.’

And so I end, close to where I began, with the concept of professionalism, both my own as an expert spectator and also in respect of what became increasingly striking about Pearl Williams as I learned to embody her words. This time I am referring not only to style and technique but also to content. Williams always played with the two associations of being a ‘pro’ – that is, both a hard-working, disciplined entertainer who knows her craft and business, and also a prostitute. One of the first things Williams tells us on the album is that she’s ‘a *chanteuse*’ which is ‘French for *kurva*.’ Her audiences were expected to know that *kurva* means ‘whore’ in Yiddish. It was a line I decided to keep in my own performance, with some heavy gestural signalling.

But there was one particular line I felt I had to remove from my performance text, despite the fact that it explained the title of the show (and the album), because I didn’t feel I could easily help my audience to understand it: ‘Polly Adler wrote a book: *A House is Not a Home*. I’m writing a sequel: a trip around the world is not a cruise’ (Williams, 1962). Perhaps you recognise the title of the book, published in 1953, from the Burt Bacharach and Hal David song of the same name. The song was actually written for a film version (which bombed) of the book, which was a ghost-written autobiography of a Jewish madam. Adler’s ‘house’ was a brothel, a frequent setting for Williams’ jokes. This chain of connections makes me think about how my own vocalic body is situated within a repertoire, as well as Marjorie Garber’s description of Jewishness as ‘spectral visibility’ – that is, ‘the visibility of the ghost’ (1999: 99). For me, it’s a ghost located in the auras created when archives and repertoires, pasts and presents, merge and eclipse each other at the intersection of professional cultures.¹³ And if there’s one thing we know about ghosts, pinning them down is always something of a challenge.¹⁴

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Notes:

¹ In Yiddish, *kurva* means prostitute; *mechaya* means pleasure; and *baitzim* (which I inserted in this text, although Williams uses the term elsewhere) means testicles or balls. Roto-rooter is an American plumbing service; Williams was presumably referring to an industrial device used by the company to clear blocked drains.

² The Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) preceded the formation of the AHRC (i.e. Council) in the UK. The Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP) website is archived at: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/parip/>.

³ The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a national exercise in the UK for assessing the quality of research at departmental and institutional levels. It is used to determine the distribution of government funding for research.

⁴ Although it appears on *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*, Giovanna Del Negro attributes this line to Belle Barth (2010: 213); however, she also notes that Barth and Williams attended each other's shows, referred to each other on stage and discussed their relationship on their LPs (191). It is therefore not unlikely that they shared effective put downs for hecklers.

⁵ You can still listen to these 2 minutes and 20 seconds of *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Md0KBVTs5IM> (last accessed 10 February 2019). For a few weeks in the year prior to the performance, the entire album was available on YouTube, but it just as mysteriously disappeared again before I began rehearsing. This, in itself, says a lot about the permanence of the seemingly ubiquitous digital 'archive', and perhaps 'archives' more generally.

⁶ In another example of repertoire in action, the Barton Brothers learned this act from hotel staff in the Catskills, where it had been originated by Red Buttons.

⁷ Lusty Juventus's *M(other)* project is included in Ludivine Allegue, Simon Jones, Baz Kershaw and Angela Piccini (2009: 2018 and accompanying DVD).

⁸ The reason for my transition into performing, at that particular stage as a practitioner, was entirely due to professional considerations – that is, because our EU funding would only

cover the costs of a certain number of people to tour to Greece where the show was to premiere.

⁹ For more about this performance, see Roberta Mock (2017).

¹⁰ Totie Fields (1930-1978) is another American Jewish comedian in the tradition of Sophie Tucker, whose act revolved around frustrated sexuality, food, consumption, ethnic aspiration and class status. Although her nightclub act was 'dirty', she achieved mainstream success via daytime talk shows in the 1970s.

¹¹ Roy Hart (1926-1975) was an actor, theatre-maker and voice teacher who developed extended vocal techniques that were originally conceived as psychotherapeutic tools.

¹² *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* takes some significant liberties in terms of historical veracity, including the fact that Bob Newhart's record didn't come out for another three years. Even more relevant in this context, there were simply no women working it like Midge Maisel in the late 1950s; you had to look to comics like Pearl Williams and Belle Barth, who was fairly regularly arrested for obscenity, to find any form of equivalence and their material was really rather different, especially from the perspective of class. Mrs Maisel is performing stand-up for a twenty-first, rather than mid-century, audience, not unlike I was trying to do while preserving Williams' actual words in my performance *A Trip Around the World is Not a Cruise*.

¹³ Elsewhere I have argued that a powerful triangle of association which connects the prostitute, actress and stereotype of the Jewess, has haunted the careers of Jewish women performers since the mid-nineteenth century (Mock 2007: 10).

¹⁴ Sometimes it takes a ghost to find one. The day after my performance, my mother (who wasn't there) sent me a message to say that my grandfather (who died over fifteen years earlier) enjoyed it very much: 'He started to cough and had trouble catching his breath, at one point. Do you remember how that used to happen when he laughed too hard and too long?'